

Jason and Marceline Short Guide

Jason and Marceline by Jerry Spinelli

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Overview

Jason and Marceline continues the stories of Jason Herkimer and Marceline McAllister, who appeared in Spinelli's earlier novel, *Space Station Seventh Grade*. Jason and Marceline begins with Jason and Marceline walking to school together for their first day in the ninth grade. It ends with them attending their ninth-grade prom.

Jason is concerned with being accepted by and liked by his friends.

Marceline is more self-contained and inner-directed; she is more concerned with doing what she feels to be right, as well as with her own personal interests. Even though these differing attitudes cause some problems in their relationship, they begin and end the book as boyfriend and girlfriend.

In the course of their year in the ninth grade, they face all kinds of pressure. Jason feels pressured by his peers into sexual experimentation.

Marceline, however, demands that the two of them go at their own pace. At one point, they even break up over problems of this sort. Then, Jason finds a partner, Heather Newsome, who is willing to do some of the things Marceline refuses to do: give him hickeys and wear his ankle bracelet. Heather says that she loves Jason and asks him to go to the prom with her. He accepts. Eleven days later, Jason discovers Heather kissing Hughie Muntz. Jason and Marceline get together again after Jason, remembering the Heimlich maneuver he learned in health class, saves the life of a seventh grader who is teased mercilessly by the ninth-grade boys.

Jason and Marceline provides some insights into the kinds of problems ninth graders face. Mostly, however, it focuses on more humorous aspects of growing up and of waking sexuality.

About the Author

Jerry Spinelli was born on February 1, 1941, in Norristown, Pennsylvania, where he spent his childhood living in a brick row house in the West End. At sixteen, he wrote his first poem celebrating a victory of his high school football team. After a local paper published it, he claims that he stopped wanting to be a major league baseball player and started wanting to be a writer. He graduated from Gettysburg College with an A.B. degree in 1963. In 1964 he received an M.A.

from the Writing Seminar of the Johns Hopkins University. He also attended Temple University in 1964. He married Eileen Mesi, herself a writer, on May 21, 1977. When they got married, she already had six children. As of 1990, he and Eileen had one more child.

During the years 1966 to 1989, when he worked for a technical publisher, Spinelli continued to desire to be a full-time author. He began his career as an author of adult novels that no one, he says, wanted to publish. He started writing for young adults after one of Eileen's children stole from the refrigerator some fried chicken that Jerry was saving for his lunch the next day. This episode became the basis of the first chapter in *Space Station Seventh Grade*. In 1991, he won a Boston Globe-Horn Book Award in fiction and a Newbery Award for *Maniac Magee*.

Setting

Jason and Marceline is set in Avon Oaks, a fictitious town in Pennsylvania based on Norristown, where Spinelli grew up. The time is around 1985, something the reader learns when Jason mentions that the spacecraft Pioneer left the edges of the solar system two years earlier. Pioneer 10 left the solar system in June 1983.

Social Sensitivity

Jason and Marceline treats forthrightly some aspects of entering adolescence that may make some readers uneasy. It treats experimentation in drinking beer and relatively harmless sexual experimentation. It involves interracial dating when Peter Kim goes out with Jewel Fiorito. In Marceline McAllister, it presents a very selfassured, mature young woman. At times, her maturity contrasts markedly with the immaturity of Jason and some of his friends.

Literary Qualities

The plot of *Jason and Marceline* is basically episodic; that is, it consists of what is really a series of short stories without too much unity between them except that all are episodes in the ninth grade life of Jason Herkimer. In the course of the novel, Jason, the narrator, matures, even though in many of the individual episodes he seems very immature.

Although *Jason and Marceline* is not as accomplished a novel as Spinelli's Newbery Award-winning book, *Maniac Magee*, it is still enjoyable to read, especially because of its humor. It is written in language fairly simple to understand, the kind of language a boy like Jason would use, and it uses the kind of language that a ninthgrader would employ, including slang.

Because of this, several reviewers of *Jason and Marceline* call the book "crude," and at least one writes of its "locker-room talk."

Jason refers several times to the *Star Trek* television series and movies, and he sees his own sexual adventures as a kind of *Star Trek* exploration. He refers to the movie versions of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Bride of Frankenstein*, allusions that may help clarify some of the conflicting emotions Jason feels throughout the novel, especially during the times when he and Marceline are having problems and when they are not going together.



Themes and Characters

The main themes of Jason and Marceline involve entering adolescence.

Jason finds himself extremely interested in the physical changes his female classmates are undergoing. He also is interested in and puzzled by the physical changes and emotional changes he is undergoing, especially his awakening sexual feelings. Another theme involves judging people on the basis of appearance alone.

Jewel Fiorito, for example, develops physically so much during the summer that the boys do not recognize her when she returns to the ninth grade.

They decide that since she is so well developed, she must be sexually active. When on Halloween Jewel wears a belly dancer's costume and the boys discover that she really can belly dance, they are even surer that she is sexually active. Jason is surprised to discover her dating one of his best friends, Peter Kim, a Korean American. When Peter fights Mike Vesto, an older boy in the ninth grade, Marceline tells Jason that Peter is upset because Vesto was telling lies about his sexual experiences with Jewel. Marceline further tells Jason that she did not need Peter to tell her how nice Jewel is.

Through most of the book, Jason feels that he is engaged in a kind of sexual race with Richie Bell, another of his best friends. When Richie and Cricket Dupree begin necking in the movies, Jason feels that he and Marceline better start doing the same. No matter what happens between him and Marceline, he feels pressured to do more. He compares "this sex stuff" to football in which one team has to keep scoring or the other team will catch up. He also feels that what one does with a girl is only the first part; "the other part is what you say to the guys afterward. In fact, I was starting to think it was the most important part."

Toward the end of the novel, Jason seems to be learning that sex is not like a football game.

Important to the book is Jason's interaction with a seventh grade boy who on the first day of school starts talking to Jason. The boy wears a belt with beads on it that form a pattern that looks like Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, so the ninth grade boys call him Rudy. After Marceline stops seeing Jason, Jason starts picking on Rudy, who thought Jason was his friend. Several other ninth grade boys also begin picking on Rudy. For some reason Jason does not understand, possibly because Rudy enjoys the attention, Rudy laughs when the boys pick on him and seems to enjoy it. He never shows any fear—no matter how vicious or physical the teasing gets.

One day in the cafeteria, however, one of the ninth graders, Finney, begins stealing Rudy's chicken nuggets. Apparently thinking Finney will eat them all, Rudy pops one into his own mouth. Finney hits Rudy hard on the back. Rudy's glasses fall off, and Jason sees that Rudy is really scared. Jason rushes over to Rudy and uses the Heimlich maneuver to dislodge the chicken that has stuck in Rudy's throat, saving



Rudy's life. Rudy thanks Jason, hugs him, and begins to smile and cry. After some hesitation, Jason hugs Rudy back. As Jason comforts Rudy, Jason notices that Marceline is smiling at him.

Jason and Marceline is also about step-families. Jason's stepfather, Ham, is very supportive of Jason and Jason's younger brother and sister. Although Jason's relationship with his younger sister, Mary, is terrible—he usually speaks of her as "cootyhead"—his relationship with his mother and stepfather is basically good, as is Marceline's relationship with her parents.

The relationship between Jason and Marceline is also treated with sympathy. Marceline realizes that she is more concerned about Jason than Jason is about her when she notices that Jason never asks her about how she did in a competition to become part of the District Band. When she points out this omission to Jason, he realizes that it is too late to ask her now. Instead, he says, "I love you." It is after this episode that Marceline stops seeing Jason until after he saves Rudy's life.

By then, however, Jason has learned to be much more considerate of Marceline.



Topics for Discussion

1. Marceline indicates throughout much of the book that Jason is being very selfish. Is he? How? Why?
2. Jason feels tremendous peer pressure, especially in regard to matters of sex, and he wants desperately to give in to that pressure. How does he handle that pressure? Does he handle it for the most part constructively or destructively?
3. What is Ham's attitude toward Jason's problems? Do you think Ham's attitude and actions are appropriate for a stepparent?
4. In health class, Looie Lopezia and Jason are partners for learning the Heimlich maneuver. When Looie's turn comes, he squeezes Jason's nipples and says, "Hi, Marcy." As a result, Jason, who is not at the time dating Marceline, beats up Looie. Why does he do that? What does the fight reveal about Jason's feelings about Marceline? Why does Jason feel the way he does when the fight is over?

Does the fight help Jason in any way?

5. For much of the novel, Jason thinks of sex as a kind of competition between two teams consisting of a male and a female each. How healthy is this attitude? How widespread is it both in the book and in real life? What kinds of problems does it cause Jason?
6. Jason has two younger siblings.

What is his relationship with them? Is it healthy?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Learn about the Heimlich maneuver and how to do it. Report on the maneuver, explaining it and especially telling when it should or should not be performed.
2. Trace the changes in the relationship between Jason and Marceline.

What do these changes say about growing up?

3. Compare and contrast Jason and Marceline. In many ways they are extremely different. In what ways are they similar? What things make the two of them so interested in one another?
4. Find episodes from early and late in the novel that give the reader insight into Jason's growth. In what ways does he grow? How significant is that growth?
5. Research the mission of the space probe Pioneer. What was its goal? Why was it important?

For Further Reference

Keller, John. "Jerry Spinelli." Horn Book 67 (July-August 1991): 433-436.

This discussion of Spinelli's becoming a full-time writer and a writer of fiction for young adults does not mention Jason and Marceline, but its discussion of Space Station Seventh Grade casts some light on the sequel.

Review. Publishers Weekly (November 28, 1986): 78. This favorable review calls Spinelli's young adult characters "fresh and funny, sometimes crude, sometimes poignant, and always very real."

Spinelli, Jerry. "Newbery Medal Acceptance." Horn Book 67 (July-August 1991): 426-432. Spinelli reviews in general terms his career as a writer for young adults and the sources of his ideas for his works.

T[wichell], E[thel] R. Review. Horn Book 63 (March-April 1987): 217.

This favorable review calls Jason and Marceline "the equally funny and often earthy sequel to Space Station Seventh Grade."

Unsworth, Robert. Review. School Library Journal 33,6 (February 1987): 95. Unsworth warns that the novel may offend some adults, but young adults "will love it."

W[ilms], D[enise] M[urko]. Review.

Booklist (January 1, 1987): 712.

Wilms recognizes that the social struggles Jason finds himself involved in are "meaningfully depicted."

Related Titles

Jason and Marceline is a sequel to *Space Station Seventh Grade*, published four years earlier. The later book contains the same characters, but they are two years older. In *Space Station Seventh Grade*, Jason and Marceline meet.

At first they are not at all friendly. In fact, Jason imagines that he detests Marceline. But before the book ends, they discover that they are greatly attracted to one another. That attraction matures even more in *Jason and Marceline*.



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